EXPLICABILITY ARGUMENTS
AND THE PRINCIPLE
OF SUFFICIENT REASON

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Understanding the power of history to enrich and instruct the present, Michael Della Rocca attempts to resuscitate historical figures and their positions, claiming in particular that, "we must regard the PSR [Principle of Sufficient Reason] and, indeed, Spinozism itself as very much live options in philosophy" (*Spinoza* 311). To most contemporary philosophers the prospect of a neo-Spinozism sounds quixotic at best. But that, of course, is because they assume the PSR is a false metaphysical principle. In engaging in the game of giving and asking for reasons, they all too often break off their investigations and accept some metaphysical datum as a brute fact.

Della Rocca has recently presented a challenge for those who would deny the PSR. In the following, I will analyze, in detail, what that challenge is, and point out some problems Della Rocca needs to address. While I am very much sympathetic to the project, until these problems can be fixed I fear Della Rocca's direct attack on metaphysicians who reject the PSR remains toothless.

According to Della Rocca, a commonplace within philosophy is the use of what he calls "explicability arguments." These are arguments where "a certain state of affairs is said not to obtain simply because the existence of that state of affairs would be inexplicable, a so-called brute fact" ("PSR" 4; *Spinoza* 306).[1] More precisely, explicability arguments seem to be inference rules of the following form:

1) p (explicability argument assumption)

2) ¬ ∃*s* Esp (metaphysical or cognitive fact)

3) ¬ p (conclusion).

First, a certain state of affairs or proposition p is assumed to obtain or be true.[2] Next it is claimed that there is no explanation for p, or there is no proposition s (sufficient reason) such that s stands in the appropriate explanatory relation E to p. Finally, "simply because" of 2), we conclude that p is not in fact the case. Of course this argument is

not formally valid. In so far as this formalization captures the argument, Della Rocca's claim must be the quite strong one that we do, in fact, employ inference patterns of this kind, and that explicability arguments, *qua* inferences, are running around on all fours in our cognitive landscape along with deductive inferences, inductive inferences, and inferences to the best explanation.

Having established what an explicability argument is, we are in a better position to outline Della Rocca's dialectical strategy before moving into detail. Della Rocca sets up a "slippery-slope" argument that is supposed to pressure us into acceptance of the PSR. The first step onto the slope is the claim that we accept explicability arguments in a wide variety of cases within philosophy. Next, Della Rocca observes that there is a form of the explicability argument having to do with existence.[3] This explicability argument for existence then turns out to just *be* the PSR. The bite comes with the claim that philosophers who wish to hold on to explicability arguments in the other cases but reject the PSR, must find some way to draw a *principled* distinction between the accepted explicability arguments and the rejected explicability argument for existence. This distinction must, Della Rocca notes, be principled on pain of begging the question against the PSR. In other words, assuming an *unprincipled* distinction between accepted explicability arguments and the rejected explicability argument for existence is only possible if one presupposes that the PSR is false, because, of course, if it is true, this move is clearly not a dialectical option. Della Rocca then explores and rejects some possible principled ways to make the distinction, and concludes, not that the PSR is true, but that there is pressure on philosophers to accept it. In Della Rocca's words, "the use of explicability arguments in these other cases puts pressure on us to accept an explicability argument here in the case of existence—unless, of course, one can draw a line between this explicability argument and others" (PSR 13-14; see also *Spinoza* 310). Thus, Della Rocca's account is a challenge to philosophers who accept certain explicability arguments but want to reject the PSR to discover some principled distinction between the explicability arguments they accept and the rejected explicability argument for existence.

So what are some accepted explicability arguments? Della Rocca gives several examples, including Archimedes' balance argument, an argument about dispositions, reductive arguments for causation, consciousness, and modality, and an argument about personal identity, to name a few. Della Rocca does not always make these arguments explicit, so it will be helpful to take the time to do so. In the following, I will focus my analysis on the first three.

The Archimedes balance argument is famous in philosophy. As Leibniz describes it:

> …[If] there is a balance in which everything is alike on both sides, and if equal weights are hung on the two ends of that balance, the whole will be at rest. That is because no reason can be given why one side should weigh down rather than the other. (321)

According to the argument schema outlined above for explicability arguments, Archimedes would be making an inference of the following form:

1) A balance with equal weights hung equidistant from the fulcrum moves.
2) There is no proposition s that stands in an appropriate explanatory relation E to (1).
3) Thus, it is not the case that a balance with equal weights hung equidistant from the fulcrum moves.

Next is the dispositions argument. Della Rocca sets it up as follows:

Imagine two objects categorically alike. They each have (qualitatively) the same molecular structure and have all the same categorical physical features. If one of these objects has the disposition to dissolve in water, could the other one fail to have that disposition? It would seem not: given their exact categorical similarity, nothing could ground this dispositional difference between the two objects, and so we reject the scenario in which there is such a difference. ("PSR" 4-5; Spinoza 307)

Formalized, this explicability argument for dispositions is:

1) There are two objects A and B that share all the same microphysical properties, but A is soluble in water and B is not.
2) There is no proposition s that stands in an appropriate explanatory relation E to (1).
3) Therefore, it is not the case that there are two objects A and B that share all the same microphysical properties, but A is soluble in water and B is not.

Lastly in our review of accepted explicability arguments is the reductive argument for causation.[4] In Della Rocca's words:

For a reductionist about causation, there must be something in virtue of which a causal relation obtains. Why is it that these events are causally related and those are not?...The reductionist about causation seems to be relying on the rejection of inexplicability in this case, just as inexplicability was rejected in the other cases. ("PSR" 9; Spinoza 307-8)

Cleaned up, this argument presumably runs something like:

1) There are two type-identical pairs of events, pair A and pair B, such that pair A is causally related while pair B is not.
2) There is no proposition s that stands in an appropriate explanatory relation E to (1).
3) Therefore, it is not the case that there are two type-identical pairs of events, pair A and pair B, such that pair A is causally related while pair B is not.

Now that we have formalized several of Della Rocca's examples of accepted explicability arguments, we are in a better position to understand just what the explicability

argument for existence is. As in the previous cases, Della Rocca never formally articulates the argument. Here is what he says about it:

> Just as we may demand an account of what consciousness is, what causation is, what modality is,…so too it can seem natural to demand an account of existence, of what it is for a thing to exist. What is it in virtue of which things that exist enjoy existence?...If we take this path, then we advance an explicability argument here: the existence of each thing that exists must be explicable, just as the consciousness of each conscious mental state must be explicable, and so on for the other cases. ("PSR" 12-13; slightly modified in Spinoza 308-9)

Following the argument schema outlined before, and making the appropriate changes in the analysis (see nn. 2 and 3) we have something that looks like this (explicability argument for existence—propositions, EAE-P):

1) p is true.
2) There is no proposition s that stands in an appropriate explanatory relation E to (1).
3) Therefore, it is not the case that p is true.

This argument ought to strike us as odd. Switching to talk of propositions and an explicability argument for *truth* clarifies something that is obscured by talking about states of affairs and an explicability argument for *existence*. Talking about an explicability argument for existence makes it sound like the explicability argument for existence is simply another kind of explicability argument, on all fours with explicability arguments for causation, consciousness, and modality. Indeed, this is exactly how Della Rocca presents things in his discussion. He moves between the kinds of explicability arguments as if they were all *tokens* of one *type* of argument. And this is exactly what he should do if the strategy is to present us with a slippery-slope style dilemma. However, it is not at all clear that the explicability argument for existence is of a kind with the other explicability arguments.

Della Rocca appears to face a dilemma of his own here. Either the explicability argument for existence is of the same kind as accepted explicability arguments, but never works (for reasons to follow), or it is not of a kind with other explicability arguments and the philosopher who wants to deny the PSR has a perfectly principled way of doing so. To see the two horns of the dilemma we need to focus on accounts of truth.

If premise 1) in the explicability argument for existence is making a metaphysical claim about p (the claim that p has the property of being true), then 2) is false. Take for instance the correspondence theory of truth, according to which p is true if and only if p appropriately corresponds to or tracks a state of affairs that obtains. If this is the theory of truth we are operating with, there is a perfectly good proposition s that stands in the appropriate explanatory relation E to 1), namely: that p corresponds to a state of affairs that obtains. The sufficient reason for p being true is simply that p corresponds to a state of affairs that obtains. The same result will hold for any other metaphysically

robust (non-deflationary) theory of truth. Take any such theory M and suppose that M accounts for truth in terms of the necessary and sufficient condition t. Then the appropriate proposition s that stands in the appropriate explanatory relation E to 1) will simply be that p satisfies t. Thus, if we are operating under a metaphysically robust theory of truth then the explicability argument for existence is simply unsound.

Suppose now that we are working with a deflationary theory of truth. Suppose that we assume that "p" is true if and only if p. In this case premise 1) is simply the assertion of any proposition p, and we can see more clearly that the explicability argument for existence is the generalized form of particular explicability arguments. Instead of premise 1) being of the form p is true, it is of the general form p. Thus, the explicability argument for existence is not at all on the same level as explicability arguments for consciousness, causality, and modality. On this interpretation, the explicability argument for existence turns out to be the schema under which all other explicability arguments fall as instances. However, if this is the case then Della Rocca's slippery-slope strategy is hash. Indeed, we can see that Della Rocca is, in fact, relying on an *inductive* argument, arguing from the acceptability of particular explicability arguments such as causation and consciousness to explicability arguments across the board. But if this is the case, the denier of the PSR has a simple and principled way to reject such a move. Just as the fact that some F's are G's does not entail that all F's are G's, the acceptability of some explicability arguments does not force one to accept them across the board, i.e., does not force one to accept the PSR. Thus, the anti-PSRer can claim that there is a principled difference between the accepted explicability arguments and the rejected explicability argument for existence because the latter is a generalization based on the insufficient inductive basis of the former.

But perhaps the acceptable explicability arguments Della Rocca has marshaled, while not forcing, at least puts pressure on one to accept the PSR. Well let us see. A single instance is enough to block an inductive strategy. So here might be an example. Let's go way back to the Garden of Eden. Suppose Eve has just convinced Adam to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Suppose Adam approaches the tree and there are two apparently qualitatively identical apples within reach, A and B. Say Adam plucks and eats A and there is no reason or explanation for why he chose A over B. Now let us run an explicability argument.

1) Adam eats apple A.
2) There is no proposition s that stands in an appropriate explanatory relation E to (1).
3) Therefore, it is not the case that Adam eats apple A.

This is a clear example of an explicability argument that does not work. 1) is an assumption that all explicability arguments require. 2) is true by stipulation, and 3) is just false. Perhaps Della Rocca would say that in constructing the background for this argument it is not fair for one to stipulate that 2) is true, that there must be a reason for Adam's eating apple A, if, in fact, he did eat apple A. However, this is just to beg the question against those who reject the PSR; it is to assume that the PSR is true! Thus it seems quite easy to generate counterexamples to explicability arguments, and this fact

is certainly problematic for any inductive strategy that seeks to generalize to the PSR from the total collection of explicability arguments. This should be an indication that explicability arguments do not form a coherent kind of inference rule but that something else is going on behind the scenes.[5]

But perhaps both Della Rocca and I have gone wrong somewhere. Perhaps, contrary to both of our assumptions, it *does* matter whether one is talking about propositions and truth versus talking about states of affairs and existence. The idea would be that one only gets these untoward results when framing the discussion in terms of the former but not the latter. This is an interesting proposal and one worth pursuing. So perhaps it is the obtaining of a state of affairs, and not the truth of a proposition, that the explicability argument for existence targets. Thus, our second formulation of the explicability argument for existence would be as follows (explicability argument for existence—states of affairs, EAE-SA):

1) State of affairs P obtains.
2) There is no state of affairs S that stands in an appropriate explanatory relation E to (1).
3) Therefore, it is not the case that state of affairs P obtains.

However, a cursory glance at this second formulation should make it clear that it suffers problems similar to those canvassed above; that is, either it is a trivial matter to make it unsound, or it is not really of the same type as other acceptable explicability arguments. To see the first problem, take again your favorite metaphysical theory of states of affairs M and what it says about when states of affairs obtain. Call this feature o. Thus, any state of affairs with feature o would be a suitable S in premise 2) making it false.[6] But even if this first problem is avoidable, the second problem looms. If we deemphasize the *obtaining* of the state of affairs as what needs to be explained and focus on the *fact that this particular state of affairs obtains with this particular content*, this second formulation is clearly a generalization from all the other particular explicability arguments and subsumes them all as instances of it. They are all cases where certain kinds of states of affairs (causal, dispositional, mental) are said to obtain.

However, another option remains on the table. Perhaps we can say that the explicability argument for existence does not target states of affairs obtaining in general, but certain kinds of states of affairs obtaining. Perhaps these states of affairs are ones in which some individual exists.[7] In this way, one could hope to avoid the objection that the explicability argument for existence is not of the same kind as other explicability arguments. Thus, just as there are certain explicability arguments concerning whether states of affairs whose content involves facts about consciousness, causes, and modality obtain, there is another explicability argument concerning states of affairs whose content involves the existence of individual entities. This third formalization might run (explicability argument for existence—individuals, EAE-I):

1) State of affairs P in which individual i exists obtains.
2) There is no state of affairs S that stands in an appropriate explanatory relation E to (1).

3) Therefore, it is not the case that state of affairs P in which individual i exists obtains.

I think this third version does manage to avoid the charge of being a different type than the other accepted explicability arguments. Unfortunately, I suspect this victory comes at a price. Acceptance of this explicability argument does not go very far in establishing the PSR. There are many other states of affairs whose content does not involve the existence of a particular individual obtaining. So this explicability argument, even if accepted, does not establish the PSR, which would require that all states of affairs that obtain have an explanation for why they are so and not otherwise.[8]

Thus, Della Rocca's challenge to philosophers who deny the PSR faces some serious difficulties that need to be addressed before it can be taken seriously. A detailed analysis reveals that there are subtle distinctions depending on whether the explicability argument for existence is formulated in terms of propositions or states of affairs. When we analyze these arguments we see that Della Rocca faces a dilemma: Either they are of the same logical type as other accepted explicability arguments, or they are of a different logical type, they are general argument schemas that include all other particular explicability arguments. If the former horn is taken, Della Rocca can make a slippery-slope argument, but explicability arguments for existence are not identical to the PSR.[9] If the latter horn is pursued, the argument schema is the PSR, but Della Rocca must give up the slippery-slope strategy and adopt an inductive one. If the argumentative strategy for accepting explicability arguments for existence is inductive in nature, then the philosopher who wishes to reject the PSR has a principled way of drawing the line between accepted and rejected explicability arguments—there is no reason to accept the explicability argument for existence because it is based on an insufficient inductive basis. Indeed, it seemed quite easy to construct counterexamples to explicability arguments. These arguments did seem to come cheap, but the only way to block this cheapness was to beg the question against the denial of the PSR.

NOTES

1.   Della Rocca was kind enough to forward a copy of his unpublished "PSR" for this paper and I am extremely grateful for it. Where possible I have tried to cite both the unpublished "PSR" and his 2008 *Spinoza*, which are substantially the same.

2.   For now I will talk in terms of propositions instead of states of affairs or entities. I trust that nothing philosophically significant will be obscured by this choice, and that my claims can always be converted into the other idiom by substituting the appropriate terminology *mutatis mutandis*. However, below we will see that there are some subtleties that do in fact hinge on this choice.

3.   As Della Rocca recognizes (nn. 1 and 2, pp. 1 and 14), talking in terms of explicability arguments for *existence* assumes that what it is that needs explaining is the state of affairs consisting of a thing's existence obtaining, and not the truth of a proposition. However, he appears to think that the two idioms are convertible and that his argument can be run on either. As I noted above, for now I want to stick primarily to talk in terms of propositions, so that what it is that needs explaining in explicability arguments for existence is a proposition's being true. Perhaps it would be better to give these two cases different names (explicability arguments for *existence* versus explicability arguments for *truth*), but in what follows I will continue to refer to

explicability arguments for existence (unless otherwise indicated) while making the appropriate modifications in my analysis.

    4.   As this example should make clear, the notion of explanation functioning in explicability arguments is wider than causal explanation. After all, one cannot invoke a causal explanation in service of an explanation for causation. Just what limits Della Rocca puts on the notion of explanation are not clear. As a first pass, I suggest that what counts as an explanation be relativized to what a community of ideal reasoners would accept as such.

    5.   I think it is much more likely that instead of being a new kind of inference rule, explicability arguments are just plain old reductios. Thus, the Archimedes example can be reformulated:

1) The balance moves (assumption).
2) If 1) then there is a difference between the weights hung or the lengths of the arms (assumption).
3) There is a difference between the weights or the lengths of the arms (1 and 2).
4) There is no difference between the weights or the lengths of the arms (empirical fact).
5) The balance does not move (conclusion).

However, this is not to say that PSR-like considerations are playing no role in this argument. In fact, as could be seen in the standoff over premise 2) above, I believe that something like the PSR is involved in guaranteeing the existence of a premise 2). If we understand the PSR as an axiom stating that $\forall p \exists s(p \rightarrow \mathsf{E}sp)$, then perhaps there is a role for explicability style arguments but they would not constitute distinct inference patterns.

    6.   Every state of affairs exists, but only certain ones obtain (see Loux 142-150). However, I'm unaware of anyone being really explicit about the metaphysics of obtaining. I suppose a state of affairs obtaining would hold when that state of affairs was part of the composition of the actual world. Thus, the state of affairs S that would explain another state of affairs, P's, obtaining, would most likely be that total state of affairs composing the possible world with the unique feature o of being actual. Another, similar, possibility is suggested by Plantinga's metaphysics of possible worlds. According to Plantinga, possible worlds just are maximal collections of states of affairs, and the actual world is that maximal collection that obtains (Loux 173-177). Here the relevant S would be a maximal collection of states of affairs and o would be S's obtaining. P's obtaining would be easily explained as being a member of this maximum collection. The difference between these two accounts is that the former explains obtaining in terms of which world is actual, while the latter explains the actual world in terms of which states of affairs obtain.

    7.   The individuals I have in mind here are the objects referred to by the names quantified over in first order predicate logic (on a substitution interpretation of the quantifier).

    8.   It might be objected that, insofar as the content of a state of affairs can be articulated in predicate logic, most states of affairs will be about existence claims for individuals when the constants in the proposition articulating the state of affairs are quantified over. So that the EAE-I might be close to being equivalent to the full blown PSR. First, it is not true that the main connective will always be a quantifier. Second, it is not clear that we want our logic to be classical, as opposed to a free logic variant.

    9.   That is, EAE-P, are about the *truth* of propositions, EAE-SA, are about the *obtaining* of states of affairs, and EAE-I, are about the *existence* of individuals. None of these is equivalent to the PSR. We saw above that only the last of these has much hope of being sound, although I suspect that much of what can be said for EAE-SA, will apply to EAE-I.

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